

The Flood

Continued

"Bardstown Road looks like a strange town with numerous strange looking folks," wrote Emma Stafford. Her daughter Ruth Hayes added that her church was "full of refugees with 50 Negroes that they didn't know what to do with."

For some, the experience of being close to different races fanned racial feelings that probably were common at the time, but which today seem closer to Nazi Germany than Louisville. One man wrote that his family had decided not to receive typhoid shots. "That course seems wise," he said, "when you see the needle biting first into colored flesh and then into Gentile and then into Jew — first into gentlefolk and then into bums — many things could be introduced into the blood stream that could be far more serious than typhoid."

But sometimes the flood softened racial attitudes.

Early in the crisis, one of Grafton's friends was ordered to take on a dangerous assignment. "There are 600 Negroes in the Coleridge Taylor Colored School at 13th and Liberty streets," Grafton wrote. "They have no food, no water, and no lights. Rioting is imminent unless someone is sent to bring order. In normal times it would be a job for a couple of squads of police, but tonight they are sending Dick, alone."

Later that day, Grafton visited the school and found the situation very different from what he had expected. No one was rioting. "The school is in perfect order. Rooms are full of cots, and many of the refugees are sleeping."

Grafton later was ordered to assume command of one of the "islands" deep in the West End — the Virginia Avenue Colored School at 36th and Virginia Avenue. There he stayed for a few days with 125 black refugees. The experience seemed to have touched him deeply. "Orders are taken with good grace," he wrote later. "There is no hysteria. . . . I am treated courteously and with re-



The flood washed out railroad tracks near New Albany, Ind. George Bailey

spect." He received many invitations to share food. "In one or two rooms they are preparing fried pork chops for breakfast — with enormous, thick cakes made of corn meal and water. I wish I were blessed with a constitution capable of bearing up under such a breakfast, but my up-bringing has been along different channels, and I decline as politely as possible."

He seemed to grow more comfortable as time passed. "I make another restless round of the rooms, sitting and chatting a while in each. There are many sore arms from the typhoid shots, but no serious illness, thank God. Some of the cute little black rascals with gleaming white teeth have found a box of crayons and are giggling over their art. It is impossible to brood among these fine people."

Hours of anxiety were broken by idyllic moments of rest. "Some of the Negroes are singing," he wrote. "I stand . . . on the dry part of the front terrace and take stock. Our world is bright, calm and peaceful. Daylight takes on a new meaning."

After a day of hard labor, he and his new friends observe the world from their island stronghold. "It has stopped raining. I do not remember when it stopped, but the moon comes up and the sky is clear and the stars are out. Standing on the front steps of the building, I can see endless reaches of moonlit water, lying quiet, still peaceful. There could scarcely be a more beautiful sight, if only the water were where it ought to be instead of where it brings misery, suffering and despair."

Then one afternoon another reservist comes to relieve him of his command. He leaves reluctantly.

"I visit each of the rooms and say goodbye," he wrote. "When I leave I am haunted by the humble thought that these people did not have any great need for me, that the service I have rendered is negligible. At the same time, they seem sorry to see me go, and their hand-shakes make me feel glad. I hope I see some of them again — sometime — somewhere."

For a white man of Grafton's generation that would be impossible. He went back to his law practice. In the 1940s, he published four novels. He died in 1982.

With the media crippled, with the lights and water out and the phone system partially dead and faltering, rumors began to fly.

"Hundreds of dead bodies everywhere [are] waiting for identification," wrote Mary Clowes in her diary. The icy waters were supposedly filled with floating corpses, and when the Louisville Varnish Co. at 1400 W. Maple St. caught fire, rumors spread through the Highlands that 1,200 people had burned to death.

Jim Fulks Sr. decided to stay at his house at 1111 S. 28th St., located on a small rise that remained above the flood crest. A neighbor — whose first name was Bob, but whose last name Fulks can't remember — was salvaging things from the water that flowed down the street, pulling out tanks of chemicals and oil drums. One day he showed Fulks his salvaged treasures, all the while looking at the dirty water for more.

Suddenly the neighbor stopped talking. Fulks turned, and the two men stared at the water.

There, among the boards and car tops, they saw something that congealed their spines. It was, remembered Fulks, "the nude body of a woman floating face-down in the slow-moving flood."

They ran to the neighbor's skiff and pushed it into the water. "I took the oars and started rowing toward the corpse while Bob reached out from the bow, seeking to get a handful of the woman's hair," Fulks said recently. "When he finally succeeded, I quickly turned the skiff toward the shore and rowed with all my might."

His heart pounded; he felt weak and nauseated; his arms were numb from rowing. The boat nudged the ground. Fulks jumped out, grabbed the woman's feet and pulled her ashore. Suddenly Bob was at his side. Together they turned the corpse over and looked into her staring eyes.

The two men looked at each other and began laughing hysterically. "Our 'corpse,'" said Fulks, "was a mannequin from the window of a nearby clothing store."

In reality only three floating corpses were found as waters receded, and only six people drowned during the flood. In reality three people — not 1,200 — were killed in the varnish-factory fire.

"People saw us digging trenches around General Hospital," said Dr. Letitia Kimsey, now 76. "The trenches were for burying garbage, but the rumor spread that it was going to be a mass grave for all the people who died of typhoid." In reality, no one died of typhoid during the flood — or of diphtheria or of smallpox.

With all certainties swept away, it was easy for imagination to overpower reason — even if you were supposed to be a professional observer of reality. John C. Rogers Jr., then a young reporter for The Louisville Times, was stationed by the famous pontoon bridge that was built over Beargrass Creek. One reporter, he remembered, stood there for an hour and watched two coffins carried over the bridge. "He multiplied that by 24 and calculated that a total of 48 people had died that day in the West End."

The story, fortunately, was never published.

The human imagination also had a way of finding humor in the midst of disaster. "Let's see," wrote Erma Steinau, "what shall I have for dinner tonight? What a problem! Shall it be beans today, or shall we have the can of hominy?"

"I'm a stranger in town," a man is supposed to have said in flood-covered Paducah. "Which way is the Ohio?" It was a joke that was probably heard in each town along the river.

Ursuline sisters, marooned at the St. George convent at 1809 Standard, were gathering for prayers when Sister Marie Bannon grabbed Sister Mary Columba Ishanski by the arm. "My law, sister," she said, "is that a man or an animal those men are lifting out of that truck?"

It proved to be a hog that had been caught as it swam through 15th Street. The hungry nuns summoned their butcher, who quickly killed the hog. "Many willing hands lifted the dead body to our back porch," wrote one of the nuns in a memoir. "Now we know which part of a pig is a ham," she added, "and which part is the shoulder. And we may whisper we know what sausage casings are."

The nuns and their 275 refugees at the Mother House on Lexington Road drank water that had been transported in whiskey barrels. "It tasted like whiskey," remembered Sister Concetta Waller, now 72. "But it wasn't strong enough to get tipsy on."

Whiskey-flavored water was also served at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary — the first time Demon Rum had penetrated that citadel of temperance.

Anglers seized their new opportunities for sport. Edward Fawbush caught a 50-pound catfish at 24th and Main. J.B. McGaughey, 1611 W. Main, gaffed an 11-inch trout in his front hall and ate it for Sunday breakfast.

Fifty people marooned in the Fontaine Ferry Park dance hall spent the flood playing piano music while the kids scampered around the dance floor. A house, brought from far upriver, had come to rest against the roller coaster.

Louisvillians took to the waters in a fascinating flotilla of boats. One young man paddled forth in a dug-out Indian canoe he had brought home from a trip to South America. Others hammered together ingenious craft. Ab Freeman nailed a platform onto four empty whiskey barrels and christened it "Straight Whiskey Four."

At the height of the flood, he paddled out to help a friend whose flooded

drugstore had been looted. "We sure were proud of our boat," he wrote. "Cameras were clicking left and right — people on every side were complimenting its uniqueness. Believe me, the field was crowded with such entries as wagons with barrels instead of wheels, bathtubs, coal boxes, rafts — anything that had the least buoyancy — on down the street we pulled — just like a parade."

Some would-be mariners were not so lucky. Kenny Batliner decided to build a skiff, and after hours of work the boat was finally launched. "Unfortunately," remembered his widow, Charlesetta, "one of the boards had a knothole in it." During its maiden voyage, the knothole popped out and the craft sank just as it reached the shore.

The most ingenious construction produced by the flood was the great whiskey-barrel pontoon bridge, erected over Beargrass Creek from Jefferson Street to Lexington Road. The 2,000-foot bridge, linking the Highlands and the flooded downtown, was born in the brain of Jake Britt, a mechanic with the fire department. "I just thought of all those whiskey barrels at the distillery on Lexington Road," remembered Britt, now 83. He suggested his idea on Jan. 21, before the true extent of the disaster was apparent. City Hall rejected the idea but two days later changed its mind.

Local architect William S. Arrasmith was put in charge of the project. Barrels were taken from the distillery and cables from the flooded warehouses of the Belknap Co. Calls went out for volunteer laborers.

Arrasmith, who died in 1965, did many buildings — the most prominent locally is the 800 apartments. The bridge, his most unusual project, was built in one day by a diverse team of 150 volunteers. "Every type of person helped," his widow, Betty, remembered recently, "clerks, lawyers, bankers. One of his best workers was a hairdresser."

By flickering lantern light, in drizzling rain, thousands of refugees crossed to safety over the bridge. Long after the crisis passed and the flood had receded, the bridge remained a "must-see" stop for out-of-town visitors until it was finally torn apart.

The prehistoric river slowly returned to its modern boundaries. On Saturday, Feb. 6, the river dropped below flood level. The great clean-up began. People returned to what was left of their homes. They found furniture stuck to walls; they discovered normal-looking

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